

The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 1919.

TO ROBERT NICHOLS.

By Edgar Lee Masters.

ENGLAND has found another voice in you
Of beauty and of truth,
True to their soul, as you are true—
Singer and soldier, yet a youth.

Out of the trenches and the rage of blood,
The hatred and the lies
You, like a wounded sky-lark, in a flood
Pour forth these melodies,

Of a spirit which has suffered, yet has soared
Above the stench of hell and death's defeats.
I look at you, as often I have pored
On the death mask of Keats.

Or the face of him quickly and gladly going
The waves of the sea under,
To the land of man's unknowing,
Or the land of wonder.

And the war had you! what can it give
In return for souls like yours
Mangled or blotted out?—who shall forgive
The war while time endures?

Back of the shouting mob, the brazen bands,
The soldiers' marching well
Gangrene cries out and Rupert Brooke's hands
Clutch in a hemorrhage of hell.

Yet you found God through this? through war,
Through love found vision, perhaps peace?
Keep them in your breast like the morning star—
May their light increase.

Waves on the sea's breast catch the light
While the hollows between
Are dark—you are a wave whose height
Is smitten by the Light unseen,

Urged by the Sea's power to the glory
Of the christening sun.
When the calm comes and darkness, transitory
Be your doubt, or none.

These words from me who have the hard way
travelled
Of pain and thought,
In a weaving never wholly unravelled,
Or wholly wrought,

For your spirit and your songs, gladness
For the hope of you, and praise
To life, who gave you out of the world's madness
In these our days.

Copyright, 1919, by Edgar Lee Masters.

BEST SELLERS AND OTHERS.

THE most remarkable of the best selling books of the past twelvemonth—indeed, of a number of years—is undoubtedly *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. We have already spoken of the circumstances which put this book in a class apart. It is sufficient to note again, and notch deeply in memory, the handicaps to wide popularity which it overcame. Its length, its title, its authorship, since IRANEZ was unknown to most Americans; its unusual price, its Latin attitude toward the relations of the sexes—these presumptive impediments to a big sale were all overcome. The book was published on August 26, 1918. In December it had found its way to the top of the pile. Enthusiastic reviews helped it; *Books and the Book World* is glad to recall its front page of September 1, 1918. Word of mouth did much; nearly every reader must have enticed others into reading it. Heavy advertising did still more; a title cannot be brought under a reader's eye every week or oftener without seducing him to read the book. The immense merit of the book did most, of course, to achieve its success.

The Good Hope.

Hardly less interesting is the case of STEPHEN MCKENNA'S *Sonia*. For six months after this book was published in 1917 nothing happened. In *Books and the Book World* for April 14, 1918, ERNEST POOLE and GEORGE MIDDLETON called attention to the novel's quality; and in our number of the week following LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE's words of praise may be found. It is a coincidence that *Sonia* began to sell. Steadily it went on selling until it had left the 10,000 mark far behind and was a definite success for a first novel. Readers may not know that first novels, however worthy, seldom pass that mark. *Sonia* is still selling.

In many respects *Sonia* and ST. JOHN ERVINE'S

Changing Winds are comparable stories, but the parallel between them in respect of sales seems to us much more extraordinary than any other likeness. Both, it appears, enjoyed a resurrection, a phenomenon not common enough among books to encourage publishers to a belief in miracles. We prefer to think that the excellence of the novels themselves is the chief explanation because it gives us faith to believe that the American public will yet do justice to ZONA GALE'S *Birth*, MARY HEATON VORSE'S *The Prestons*, IDA A. R. WYLLIE'S *Towards Morning*, ROBERT NICHOLS'S *Ardours and Endurances*, and other volumes named by publishers in their interesting statements which we print this week. We think the general candor of these statements will impress those who read them. Publishers are astonishingly human. While they are seldom averse to making money, we have known a publisher to show more joy over the sale of 100 copies of one of his books than over the sale of 10,000 copies of another. There are booksellers the same way. . . . The explanation? Perhaps it's merely satisfied vanity at finding 100 people who apparently agree with your own opinion. And, just possibly, it's a real affection for what seems to you a fine book and a real eagerness to have it do for others what it did for you.

A Threat or Promise.

Which reminds us that after we have completed the casual counsels of this page on the subject of *Writing a Novel* we have it in mind to treat exhaustively the topic *What Every Publisher Knows*. It will be addressed to young authors only, unless some other audience shall seem more meet. It will deal extensively with publishers' Suppressed Desires, which are not, as some may conclude, inevitably identical with the writings of young authors. . . . Frivolous Thought: What, do you suppose, old Doctor FREUD would have made of "Twins brillig and the silthly toves"?

OUR OWN LEAGUED NATION.

WE hold no brief, as the saying goes, for a League of Nations, necessarily; nor even of necessity, for *The Government of the United States: National, State and Local*, by WILLIAM BENNETT MUNRO, which lies on the desk before us and which the Macmillan Company publishes at \$2.75. But we do hold a brief for the Leagued Nation, otherwise the United States of America, and think it a pity so many citizens of such a commonwealth continue to know so little about it. Nor can we imagine a happier time than this for them to inform themselves on the subject. For if they are puzzled about the question of surrendering some of their national sovereignty in entering a League of Nations they should at least be able to talk sensibly about the Union of the Thirteen States. How many of us talk about the policies of "the fathers"—and cannot for the life of us, when pinned down to it, distinguish the attitudes on national questions of two so opposite statesmen as ALEXANDER HAMILTON and THOMAS JEFFERSON.

No one, in a sweeping phrase, knows "anything" about American history, properly speaking, except the handful of men who have written about it; and this despite the fact that no country has had more or more brilliant historians; and despite the fact that there are in existence studies by others than Americans, such as BRYCE'S *American Commonwealth* and LORD CHARNWOOD'S *Abraham Lincoln*, without comparison in the literature of other lands. Now Mr. MUNRO, whose book we mentioned at the outset, is professor of municipal government at Harvard; he writes with lucidity and point and in beautifully definite but very simple language. But because his book has, with its marginal headings, somewhat the appearance of a textbook and can be so used, we dare say the General Reader will shun it. The General Reader will make a grave mistake. He is under no obligation to memorize what he reads. No one will subject him to an oral or written examination after he has finished a chapter. He can read the book for pleasure! He can skip along, picking up interesting bits here and there and emerging with a really comprehensive view of American government. He can even, without any agony at all and with considerable enjoyment, equip himself to apply an acid test to some of the political doctrines that are handed to him in gilt-edged speeches and articles nowadays. He can furnish forth his mind with whole new scenic sets and no longer be under the necessity of playing all his arguments as "acts in one," to use the vaudeville formula for the stunt backed by a drop curtain merely. All these things are lovely possibilities which the General Reader will pass by. . . . But for our part we shall keep *The Government of the United States: National, State and Local* on the open shelf and when we want to know, for example, the terms of the law by which the Government took over the railroads of the country a year ago, summed up in a couple of capable sentences, we shall pull it down, consult the index, and then turn to page 259. A thing of utility can also be a joy forever.

The Librarian's Corner

CONDUCTED BY

FRANK PARKER STOCKBRIDGE.

A LITERARY EXPLORATION.

NOT long ago a librarian friend took me behind the scenes in the Library of Congress at Washington. He led the way through that wing of the huge bookstacks known as the "copyright section." Tier upon tier of iron shelves, nine stories high and running to the length and almost the width of a city block, crowded with books as tightly as they could be packed in; 360,000 titles or more, my friend told me; one copy of every book copyrighted in the United States since 1878.

It was like sauntering through a graveyard. Names of dead and gone publishing houses, once familiar and now no longer heard of, stood out here and there, flanked by long rows of other names totally unfamiliar even to the librarian with his twenty years of intimate association with all sorts of books. Titles there were that brought back boyhood pictures of long forgotten incidents and associations; names of authors that once were household words, but that one nowadays never sees outside of the second-hand bookstalls.

Books One Never Knew.

And just as in the burying ground, even in one's home town, the names of most of the gravestones are, after all, those of persons one never knew in life, so the great bulk of these dead and buried volumes were the sort of books one never knows in life. Somebody had written every one of them; somebody had printed and bound them, somebody had, perhaps, made money out of them in one way or another, but that anybody had ever read them was difficult to believe. County histories with their biographies of local celebrities, fantastic treatises on absurd and amateurish theories of the Creation, pathetic thin volumes of sermons by earnest unknown preachers, thousands upon thousands of books of verse bearing upon the very contours and embellishments of their covers the indefinable earmarks of the job printing office that stamps them indelibly as having been printed at the author's expense.

And then there were that other class of books that nobody ever hears of but that sell by the hundreds of thousands, by the millions, the output of the big subscription book publishers whose advertising appears only in the "Agents Wanted" column, and who never send copies of their publications in to the literary editor for review. Presumably people read these books. They buy them, or at any rate they are sold to them, which is not quite the same thing. These are the books one sees in the farm house twenty miles from the railroad, pathetic evidences of a certain groping for something which those who seek it would not recognize under the name of culture.

Subscribe Now!

Every great event brings its crop of these subscription books. The Martinique disaster, the San Francisco earthquake, the sinking of the Titanic, the assassination of President McKinley—these and a thousand other catastrophes have furnished the themes for subscription book "literature." Timeliness is the essential element for big sales. I lunched the other day with the head of one of the largest subscription book publishing houses. He was tired, he said.

"It has been a hard winter," he remarked. "The armistice caught us all unprepared, and we have been swamped with demands from agents for war books. Then Colonel Roosevelt's death came without any warning, and of course we had to put out a *Life of Roosevelt*. That's going pretty good, though."

"How many have you sold so far?" I asked.

"Close to 800,000, and it will run over a million," was the startling reply. "You see, when we do get a good book in our business, we sell a lot of them. I have not had a book in ten years that sold less than 200,000."

"Do your books sell in the stores?" I asked.

"I tried it once," said the publisher. "I left a dozen copies on sale in the book department of a big Chicago department store. A week later I dropped in to see how it was going. Do you know, somebody had sneaked in there when nobody was looking and put another copy on the shelf! The original dozen were still there, too, and we never did find out where that thirteenth book came from."